

Leroy Mollena

Tape No. 36-18b-1-98

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Leroy Mollena (LM)

Ho‘olehua, Moloka‘i

June 5, 1998

BY: Jeanne Johnston (JJ)

JJ: My name is Jeanne Johnston and I am interviewing Leroy Mollena. We are in Ho‘olehua, Moloka‘i and the date is June 5, 1998.

Leroy, can you tell me when you were born and where you were born?

LM: I was born on August 2, 1934 in Hālawa Valley, island of Moloka‘i.

JJ: What was your father’s name?

LM: My dad’s name was Matteo Mollena.

JJ: And your mother’s name?

LM: My mother’s maiden name?

JJ: Mm hmm [yes].

LM: Bernice Nahoopii.

JJ: So was your mother pure Hawaiian?

LM: My mother was—yes, was a pure Hawaiian.

JJ: And your dad?

LM: My dad was pure Filipino.

JJ: Was he born in Hawai‘i or did he come from the Philippines?

LM: He came from the Philippines. As I understand, he got to Hawai‘i and the first island that he arrived on was on the island of Maui at the age of twenty-six. Since then up till when he died at the age of, I think it was, eighty-five or eighty-six.

JJ: Where did he meet your mom?

- LM: He met my mom in Hālawā Valley and then that time, he was working at the plantation at Pu‘u o Hoku. And at which time, to what I understand, he met my mom and she was about fourteen years old when he first met. And then shortly thereafter, they got married. She was very young, to what I understand.
- JJ: How many kids did they have?
- LM: There’s two sisters and three brothers.
- JJ: And you lived out in Hālawā?
- LM: In Hālawā Valley.
- JJ: What did your father do at that time?
- LM: Well, most of his life he was a taro planter in the valley. After he got through working as a pineapple planter at Pu‘u o Hoku, he moved down into the valley, and then thereafter as a taro planter.
- JJ: Can you describe what it was like when you were a kid in Hālawā Valley?
- LM: Well, I remember people (living on both sides of the river) in the valley. I remember the river. I remember both sides of the valley with taro patches. And I remember there’s a school, there was a church, and the (swinging) bridge across the river. And the people living in the valley.
- JJ: Do you know how many people. . . .
- LM: During the time, I couldn’t say exactly the number of people but there were a few family that living on both side of the valley. And most of them were Hawaiians that most of their life, they were taro planters. That was their means of livelihood, and as a kid I remember that.
- JJ: How did you get in and out of the valley at that time?
- LM: What you call? My grandpa had an old beat-up station wagon and I remember that was our only means of getting in and out the valley then at the time. This was in the early [19]40s.
- JJ: What was the road like in . . .
- LM: The road was all—not what it is today. It was secondary. In other words, it was dirt and rocks and holes. That’s the kind of road condition I remember during that period.
- JJ: Did you go out very often, did you leave the valley very often?
- LM: Not that much I recall. The only time we left the valley it was on special occasions. And I recall when we came down to town to do shopping for the house and whatever other things that our parents did. And it was a one month thing that I know of when I was a little kid, that we come from Hālawā Valley and we call Kaunakakai town as a town where we do all our shopping and head back to Hālawā Valley. It was a monthly thing that I know of or I recall as a young man then at the time.
- JJ: It must have taken quite a while to get into Kaunakakai in those days from Hālawā.

- LM: I think it was about forty-five minutes to an hour at least, that I recall. Well, then that time, the vehicle is not what it is today. (Chuckles) We had a beat-up—grandfather had a beat-up—old station wagon and it took a little while to get to town.
- JJ: What kind of games did you play as kids down there?
- LM: As far as games, I know we did a lot of work in the taro patch, that was our means of livelihood. As far as playing, I recall, during the weekdays, there was very little playing for us. The only games that we played was when we were in school. And like baseball, volleyball—what do you call it? Bean bag?—and the bean bag as I recall that. And on the weekends, we spend most of our time, that's the only time free time that we had that our parents (let us play and) we were always told on a Sunday, no work. That's when we do what we wanted and we always ended up down the beach or up the valley to the falls and did our thing. There was always on a Sunday where we look forward for, as far as activities, we were allowed to do whatever we wanted to do.
- JJ: Did you do much fishing?
- LM: Oh yes. Lot of fishing. River fishing, net fishing, diving, pole fishing, we did a lot of fishing. That was a means of livelihood then in the valley. Whatever we harvest from the river and from the ocean, that's what we live on. That was our means of livelihood and means of support.
- JJ: There's several big waterfalls up that valley, aren't there?
- LM: Yes, there was one that I remember as a kid that we always went on the weekends and walk up to the trail. That was the Moa'ula Falls. Then at the time when we were little kids, it was really a pool [compared] to what I see then and now. It is not the falls or pool that I know of. Today, it's just about—the last time, it was just about completely covered with, we call it *'ele'ele* rocks. And it's not a pool like when we were kids then. We used to go up and fish (for *'o'opu*, *'ōpae*, and *hīhīwai*) in that fall and we used to swim in the pool.
- JJ: Somewhere to go?
- LM: There was lot of fish in there. There was a lot of, what we call *'o'opu*. There's lot of that Hawaiian shrimp.
- JJ: *'Ōpae*.
- LM: *'Ōpae. Hīhīwai*. That was about it. Yeah, that was the three things that I mentioned, *'o'opu*, *hīhīwai*, and. . . .
- JJ: Was it cold in the pool?
- LM: It was really cold. I mean, cold, cold, yeah, for sure.
- JJ: Did your parents speak Hawaiian?
- LM: My parents speak fluent Hawaiian. My dad speak fluent Japanese—I mean, correction. Filipino (laughs). Don't mind me, I'm kind of nervous. Of course, us children, we spoke broken English and broken Filipino—I mean broken Hawaiian, broken Filipino. And the only language we speak that we were taught to speak really well was the English language.

JJ: In school.

LM: In school, yes.

JJ: Where did you go to school?

LM: I attended the Hālawā School, that was in the [19]40s, up to 1950 and I graduated from the Hālawā Valley school. From there I went to the Kamehameha Boys [School] and I stayed there for four years as a boarder.

JJ: On O‘ahu?

LM: On O‘ahu. I graduated in 1954 and came back to Moloka‘i and had a family. Found a job with the state and worked for the state for thirty-three something years. And I retired from the state.

JJ: What is your wife’s name?

LM: I married twice, you know. I didn’t mention that in. . . .

JJ: That’s all right.

LM: (Chuckles) My first marriage, I was married to Olivia Rodrigues, her maiden name. Became known as Olivia Mollena. I have three living daughters. And my second marriage is with this woman here, Victoria Kaipo Mollena [VM]. We have two sons and two daughters.

JJ: Do you have any grandchildren?

LM: I have (chuckles). . . .

VM: By the first marriage, let’s see, about nine.

JJ: Nine grandchildren?

LM: Mm hmm.

VM: And by this marriage, about eleven.

JJ: Oh my goodness. So you have nine by your first marriage and eleven by your second. Any great-grandchildren?

VM: Not yet.

LM: No we have, eh?

VM: Only grandchildren.

LM: Grandchildren only, yeah. No great-grandkids.

JJ: That’s wonderful. So you worked for the state here then most of your life?

LM: Since 1955, yes.

- JJ: Did you live in Ho‘olehua most of your life or you came back after school?
- LM: No, I lived in Hālawā. That’s where we—until, let me see, 1954 I graduated from Kamehameha, went back to Hālawā. I worked for Murphy—no. I worked for the Ward sisters at the Pu‘u o Hoku Ranch. And I got married to my first wife, Olivia, I believe at ’55. Shortly thereafter, moved down to Kaunakakai. We lived at (Kalama‘ula, wife Olivia’s) dad homestead there. And from there, I got a job with the state. Was married to the woman for eleven years, yeah? Some reason, marriage didn’t pan out, we got divorced and I met my second wife, Victoria. And since then, we got married 1968.
- VM: [Nineteen] sixty-eight.
- LM: [Nineteen] sixty-eight till this day. So I’m married to this woman for about thirty-something years I believe. Yeah?
- VM: Thirty years.
- LM: Thirty years. That’s that with my marriage (laughs).
- JJ: Tell me what the area looked like in Hālawā just before the tidal wave. Just kind of describe what the community looked like at that time. It was . . .
- LM: As far as a kid, I mean, it was beautiful. Both side of the valley. We used to call Hālawā the paradise valley because on both side of the valley we had people living then, like I said, we had the school, we had the swinging bridge, we had the river with the trails on both side that goes up to the fall. We had taro patches, we had animals, we had plants there. Everything else in the valley was just like paradise to us. It was beautiful then. It was full of life. People was real happy.
- JJ: Did music play a big part of your life down there in the valley?
- LM: I think it did.
- JJ: There was a lot of music?
- LM: Oh yeah. I guess that’s where I learned where—living as a family, helping each one, each one has a family. That’s how we were brought up, always helping each other whether it’s with the immediate family, or family, or friends within the valley. We always helping each other and sharing with each other. And that’s how we were brought up, that I know of anyway.
- JJ: What happened? Do you remember where you were first thing on the morning of April 1, 1946?
- LM: Oh yeah. That I know. We were living with my grandfather. It’s an old Hawaiian-type home and they have this big veranda. And on that morning, we were on the veranda having breakfast. I remember we’re having breakfast, we heard this unusual breaking sound of branches. We noticed this unusual rushing of water coming from the ocean direction right into the river and up into the valley. But then, at that time, well, for us, we were not aware of what was happening. So that’s what the first thing I remember, having breakfast, seeing this wild rush of water, hearing the breaking branches.
- JJ: How far were you from the ocean at that time?

LM: Not too far. We were just about (near to the river and not too far from) the ocean, maybe from the valley up where (we were living about) the distance of maybe quarter mile. . . .

VM: . . . house or what?

LM: No, no.

VM: Farther than that?

LM: I'd say about a—have you been down Hālawā Valley?

JJ: Yeah, yeah.

LM: You know where the church is?

JJ: Yeah, yeah.

LM: By the church. Just you make the turn. My grandfather's house is right there. Where the church—but never have church then there. I'd say about, what's that, about a quarter mile in?

JJ: Yeah, that's not very far in.

LM: I say about quarter mile in, or three-quarter miles in. We were living right close to the ocean. It wasn't, I'd say about three-quarter miles to the ocean and very close to the river.

JJ: How big was the house?

LM: It was an old type house, and it was, like I said, there was an upstairs, there was a . . . We had three bedrooms, big living room, one small little kitchen, one large outside, we call that, was a porch like. No, no, veranda, it's a veranda. That's the old-type Hawaiian [house]. We had a large, long table where we feed the family. And underneath the house, we had this where the outside cooking. They did a lot of outside cooking, like food cooking, taro cooking, *poi* pounding. And I remember my grandpa had a two-man canoe also stored under the house. That's what I remember. It was an old built type home.

JJ: Was there any electricity up there?

LM: No, there was no electricity then. Everything was all kerosene. And I don't believe we had any gas lantern then at time. It came later. Was all kerosene.

JJ: So you were having breakfast and you can hear the. . . .

LM: Well, we heard of this cracking—that's when we were out—like I said, we heard this cracking of branches, you know, that breaking. And we look, we're right there, the river's right there my grandfather's house. And the river and the corner and they have this huge *hau* tree and we heard a breaking and not know what was that cracking branch. It was just like a hand coming in with this rush of water, breaking up branch, just like one hand, breaking the branches and this rush of water. And we was wondering, what was this? And then that time, we saw that, we was wondering, what's happening?

And then, I'm not sure whether it was the second or third wave, and that's when got us kind of

wondering, hey something must be wrong. That's when that wave, whatever second or third wave, it knock off the bottom part of my grandfather's house. I don't know what they call that. Was a corner post, anyway. And that's when our parents say, "We'd better get out of here."

That's when we went up to—there's a county road right back of the house. We got on to the county road, run up to this ridge we call the Nāpali Ridge, and we went up to that as far as we can get to that ridge, and from there, looking down into valley, that's when I saw all this happening. Waves after waves. Seeing what's happening with the swinging bridge (gone). Seeing what's happening with the taro patch, seeing what's happening with the animals. Because my dad had horses tied—well, the people in Hālawā Valley had horses tied—along the taro patch bank to trim whatever grass on the banks. And I remember my dad had three horses that he lost during that period. Like I said, I remember seeing all this happening when we were up on this ridge.

JJ: How many were there on Nāpali with you?

LM: I remember my dad, my mom, my brothers, my sisters. My grandmother was dead then at the time grandfather. I'm not sure whether Kawaas was with us then or the Akinas but I know there was several families. But I know we were up on that ridge. I'm not sure who was up besides our family.

JJ: How high up do you think that you were up the ridge?

LM: It's right down in the valley, just before you get down to the valley, there's a ridge, we call it Nāpali Ridge. The shortcut way we used to take that trail up to the road to get to Pu'u o Hoku Ranch. We used to take that trail, or ridge, as a shortcut. And we call that ridge, Nāpali Ridge, because there was a family living right below there, John Akina. And his Hawaiian name was Nāpali so we named 'em after him. Nāpali. He was named after the man that lived just below that ridge, you see. It was not a name given by the map, it was just that the people of Hālawā call 'em Nāpali Ridge.

JJ: So that's about fifty feet high, isn't it?

LM: If you been up to Hālawā Valley, the last turn before you get down to the valley, right at that point, looking down to the valley, I'd say about—the distance, hundred, three hundred yards up. I'd say about three hundred yards up along that. . . . It wasn't too far up you know. I couldn't say in distance, though. Then, like I said, it's just up on that ridge and it wasn't too far up anyway. As soon as we got to where we knew was safe enough and looking right down into the valley—that's when we seen all what was taking place, like I said. This huge wave and after wave.

JJ: Where was the swinging bridge?

LM: It was right where the—there was the school, there was the church, and there people were living. Then we had the family living, the Kahalewai family, the Kawaas family, the Kaopuki family, and there were the swinging bridge. This was right across the school. It was right where the river, Hālawā river, is. It was right down almost to the mouth of the ocean. I cannot say distance but it was very close to the bay, Hālawā Bay.

JJ: Is that . . .

LM: I cannot tell you exact distance, whether it was a hundred yards or fifty yards to it. It was right

there, close to the bay, that I know of.

JJ: Is the ruins of the church still there?

LM: Well, the ruin wasn't caused by that tidal wave.

JJ: Oh, okay.

LM: That was caused by one fire way after. But the church was still there. I believe there was no damage to the church by that water. I don't believe . . .

JJ: So your house was down . . .

LM: . . . it had any effect. The house, yeah. The house was down. All houses was close along the river bank or close to the ocean. These are the houses that got damaged by that wave action and the people that I mentioned. Across the river, I remember there were several homes, I'm not sure whether the. . . . Where that family? What was my Uncle Charlie's name, the one that used to come around?

VM: Kala'au.

LM: Yeah, I know the Kala'au family. There was a *Pākē*, they call 'em Ah Sing. I'm not sure. But there were houses across the river, also got damaged. About one or---I'm not sure whether two or three houses got damaged. The houses that got damaged was close to the ocean. And I recall across the railroad, about three houses. I just remember three. On this side of the river, one, two, three, four, and then came to my grandpa. About four houses and my grandfather, just knocking off that bottom of that house. I say four houses, the damage.

JJ: Did you see the—you said you saw the water coming in? Can you describe it?

LM: Oh yeah.

JJ: What did it look like when it was coming in?

LM: Well from---anyway, when we got on top of that ridge, first thing we noticed, the bay, inner valley, the ones across, and that's one on the—I don't know what the name of the bay. One is Kaawili and I don't know what the other one. There's two bays. And when we got to the top, what I remember seeing this drawback. Just like one---water being rushed or drawn back out towards the ocean. I can see the bottom, I can see rocks, I can see the sand, and whatever rubbish. And then all of a sudden, past the bay—if you've been down to Hālawa—past the bay, I don't know how far out, and then all of a sudden this huge wave. I don't know how big that wave was. And then each time the wave came into the valley and up into the valley, it went farther up and went more wider across the valley. Each time it came in, it came bigger and bigger and bigger. I don't know whether it was in half an hour or forty-five minutes until that whatever surge of waves after waves. Then after it settled down, my family, we went back down to see what was the damage. And after what we saw, after that wave after wave, I mean, it was something.

JJ: What did it look like when you went down there?

LM: There was no taro patch, there was no animals, there was no bridge. We know there was houses damaged. Where there [used to be] houses, there was no houses. There were dead fish, dead

animals, and that's what I remember.

JJ: Were there any people that were . . .

LM: No, there were no people that got hurt. There was only story I heard about this family that lived close to the beach. There was two old folks with a young boy or grandson. What we understood, for some reason—the story that they told, I never seen—that it's just like the act of God that this house, the wave picked 'em up. Wave, was the very first house way down to the beach and brought it all the way up to where the school was and there was an old road and just put it down. And then the wave action, whatever, *wen* disappear, went back, and they ran to safety. Then the next wave came and the house was gone. This is a story. I don't know whatever, but this is what—stories after everybody, when things was over and then they sat down and started to talk about what they witnessed and what they saw of the damage and what had happened to them. That's what I remember.

JJ: So did you move back, right back into the house? Did you stay in the house after that? Your grandparents' house?

LM: Yeah, we stayed in my grandfather's place. You see the house, like I said, only the bottom part that got knocked off. And yes, we moved back into 'em.

JJ: Do you remember if anybody was scared to stay there after the tidal wave? Did anybody move?

LM: I don't believe it, not right away. I don't believe anybody moved right away. What they did was look at the damage and I think had, after the damage they had, people that came in and look over the damage and then some people got help. And the people that really got help was the one that got mostly hurt by that tidal wave. That's what I remember.

JJ: What about the taro patches? Did you . . .

LM: Oh, the taro patch, as far as the taro patches, it took awhile for the people—my dad, my uncles—to get their taro patch back. But what had happened, to what my dad told us, that no ways, because the sand—there was too many sand that was in the taro patch. And they try to bring back the taro. And that's what had happened after they couldn't. And I believe, most of the people there in the valley moved out, they went outside, I believe. I know some of them. And then like my dad, my uncle them, had to look for state job. The first place I remember my dad got a job was working down at Kalaupapa. And then some other people that was affected by that tidal wave in the valley, the Kawaa, the Kaopuki, my uncle, and my dad, and couple more other families from Hālawā had to look job working with the state. And that was down Kalaupapa, I remember that.

JJ: Did they help with the water—fix the water system down there for them at Kalaupapa?

LM: That was part of their job that I know. You're talking about the water going along that Waikolu, going up into Waikolu Valley? I recall they did a lot—I believe they did that because when I worked down at Kalaupapa, that was my first day job and that was part of my, our job to maintain that water line. So I assume they did all that, doing that during the 1940s, that water line or whatever from the settlement to Waikolu Valley.

JJ: So there was a dramatic change to the community there in Hālawā after that.

- LM: Oh yeah, it was. They couldn't---see their livelihood was taro planting and after that tidal wave, like I said, I recall people moved out. I remember one of the Kawaas moved to the—I think was Maui. And then my cousin them—oh, my aunty them, moved to Honolulu and they live in Waimānalo. You know my cousin them, the Akinas, Nahoopiis. Some of the---my dad, my uncle, and some of the Hawaiians stayed back and tried to replant, if they can, taro. It didn't work and then they left and looked for job outside of Hālawā. That's the reason why Hālawā Valley is today what you see today. Not much people living in valley. If you went down and looked at the valley, it's not what it was like that I remember when I was a kid.
- JJ: Do you know how many people are living down there at this time?
- LM: Family. Gee, I cannot say. It was a small—it wasn't a big, big family down in the valley, you know.
- VM: Now, do you know anybody that lives down?
- LM: Now? Anybody live there in the valley now? *Chee*, of the original, I don't think so anybody.
- JJ: They don't have any more taro patches or anything there?
- LM: No. Really original, you know. From the time till now, all the people that I know of then, I think none of them. All passed away. We're the original now, the children. I think that's—you probably talked to some of them. We're the original now. The people that lived there one time, I think they all history today, they all passed away—the families. My dad, my mom, my uncle, my grandfather, and you name 'em, they're all gone. We're the only living one from that time, 1946 until today, that witnessed whatever had happened, till living today. The Solatorios, I think I believe you talked to him, I'm not sure. The Kawaas, Nahoopiis, the Akinas, the Mollenas, the Tinaus. Anyway, some dead, I think. I think so. My cousin Sam. And that's about it, I can recall, yeah.
- JJ: What do you think now, when you hear the tidal wave warning? What does that bring up for you?
- LM: Well for me, I'll go back remember what happened when I was a small, when it happened 1946 and see what damage it did. Still have that in me, I think I still can remember.
- JJ: When you hear the siren now, do you head for the hills?
- LM: No, no. I don't head—no, no, no, no. But I still remember all that, no matter what, when every time they say there's a—well, today it's called tsunami. And I go right back, remembering 1946. But I mean, I don't head for the hills 'cause (chuckles) I live way away from the ocean so I pretty much safe. But I mean, but come back to me and then I remember during my time when I was a young man and I can imagine people living close to the ocean today when they. . . . Well, today they get warning, so they way in advance to when our time. We had no warning. So. . . .
- VM: Just got to believe in . . .
- LM: Well, what we did, we just left everything and what we had and took off and ran up to safety. I remember then when we was kid, I was about eleven going twelve, I think, then at that time.
- JJ: Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

LM: (Pause) You mean about the damage to the place? Or the . . .

JJ: Just anything.

LM: Well, as far as missing the valley, that always will be with me. The memories when I was a young kid growing up, and how the valley was then and what we enjoyed from the valley, and what had happened to the valley. And that always be with me, as long as I live, I will never forget that. And the people and families that live in the valley, that memory will always be with me as long as I live. That's all I can say. Like I said, we the generation, the only generation living today. I think I mentioned most of them, the Solatorios. Did you talk to Philip Solatorio?

JJ: I'm going to talk to him tomorrow.

LM: He's really well versed with what happened and he even had pictures, I think, of the valley. He has, I think, most of what you need. Pictures of the valley, damage to the valley, and he pretty much know what happened during that time. I think you'll have a good interview with that person.

VM: He seems to be . . .

LM: He's very, very, well, yeah . . .

JJ: Well thank you so much. Thank you. I really appreciate your doing this for me.

LM: I hope I gave you everything that you needed that I know of that took place during that time and that's about what I remember. I hope that helps you with whatever you got to gather for documentary or . . .

JJ: Well, thank you very much, Leroy.

END OF INTERVIEW

TSUNAMIS IN MAUI COUNTY: Oral Histories

**Center for Oral History
Social Science Research Institute
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

March 2003